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ABSTRACT

Previous research has indicated that father absence detrimentally affects children's cognitive functioning. Demographic data and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were gathered from 55 females and 45 females from divorced families where the mother received custody, 19 females and 21 males with a deceased father, and a group of matched control subjects from intact families who were similar in age, sex and academic major to the divorce and death groups. No significant differences were found in any aspect of SAT performance. To examine the effects of parental absence on the sex role development of children, 27 males and 49 females of divorced parents with maternal custody and 23 females and 19 males who experienced paternal death were matched on sex and age with subjects from intact families. All subjects completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) and a demographic questionnaire. Although the BSRI masculinity score averaged about two points higher for both sexes in the parent-absent groups, no differences were statistically significant. Although trends were identified, further analysis revealed no significant differences between groups in the number of subjects in each classification. The findings tend to support a cognitive developmental perspective and suggest a need for continuing research on the effects of parental absence on sex role development and intellectual functioning. (Author/JAC)

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THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL ABSENCE ON SEX ROLE DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT

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The study of child development has for many years emphasized the role of parent influences upon child behavior. Parents have been suggested to be important for their contribution of genes, affection, expectations, the model they furnish, the environments they make available, and their differential reinforcement of child behaviors. Not surprisingly, both developmental theorists and the general public have tended to believe that the absence of a parent is likely to be deleterious. As it has been estimated that up to 45% of the children growing up in the '80's will for some period of time live in a single-parent household, there has been increasing concern about what this may mean for our country's children. Examination of the literature shows that past investigations in this area have dealt almost exclusively with the effects of father absence. A focus on fathers may have resulted because the father has been the most likely parent to be missing. It is most often unwed mothers who keep children, males who are in the armed forces, husbands who travel for work, fathers who die, and women who receive custody of children following divorce.

Two of the major areas that have been studied in the single parent area are sex role development and intellectual functioning. I shall first briefly consider past conclusions based on empirical research with respect to intellectual functioning and father absence and then describe our research. Herzog and Sudia in a 1973 review of research on children in fatherless

families concluded that any effect on children's scholastic achievement due to paternal absence had not been demonstrated, given the inadequate methodological control of family socioeconomic status. Shinn in a more recent publication reviewed research on father absence and children's cognitive development as assessed by IQ, achievement tests and school performance. She surveyed 58 studies. Four reported effects upon quantitative-verbal difference scores as a function of father absence. Of the remaining 54, 21 found some detrimental effect, 18 reported no effect, and 5 positive or mixed effects. However, Shinn considered that not all studies were methodologically adequate. 16 of the 28, or 57%, of the methodologically adequate studies found detrimental effects, of father absence on intellectual performance. However, Shinn also noted that the magnitude of these effects were frequently not so large as those due to socioeconomic status.

Shinn suggested that future research should pay attention to the variables of type of absence, age of onset, duration of absence, and income in the single-parent household.

These are some of the variables that we have chosen to look at in our research. We were particularly interested in the long-term effects of parental absence due either to death or divorce on intellectual performance as measured by Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores, or SAT.

The earliest studies in this area were motivated by the assumption that father absence affects the verbal and quantitative patterns of ability, especially in male children. It was suggested that superior ability in math as compared to verbal scores reflects a typically masculine approach, while relative verbal superiority indicates a feminine approach. One of the implications of this viewpoint was that male children living in a

father absent home would develop a more verbal, feminine approach either because the mother serves as the primary role model or because she directly teaches more verbal skills.

Four studies, those by Funkenstein in 1963, Carlsmith in 1964, Gregory in 1965, and Nelson and Maccoby in 1966, reported evidence suggesting that male college students from single-parent homes had relatively higher verbal than quantitative SAT scores. Only 2 of these studies examined data for females and they found no significant effects. In contrast to these studies, a 1977 study by Chapman found that father absence in males was associated with lower verbal ability. Chapman also found that verbal scores for males with a stepfather fell between boys without a stepfather and boys from intact families.

The present study addressed 2 questions:

The first asks: are there differences in SAT performance between college students from single-parent and intact families?

The second asks: do demographic variables influence any effects of parental absence? The variables examined are listed in Table .

Respondents were solicited from the undergraduates enrolled in introductory and child psychology classes at Purdue University. Only Caucasian students who had not been adopted were included in the sample. Our sample consisted of 55 females and 45 males from divorced families where the mother had received custody for 85 of the students and the father had custody for 15; data were analyzed for 19 females and 21 males with a deceased father. In all cases, parental absence had occurred prior to age 18. Each of the single parent respondents were matched with students from intact families on major, sex, and age. SAT scores for each of the 280 students were obtained from the Dean of Students office. Table 1 gives the means for the SAT scores by sex and family status. Our sample is similar to the national population in that both sexes' quantitative scores are higher

than verbal and this difference is greater for males than for females. Not surprisingly mean scores of this population are somewhat higher than those of all college bound seniors and the standard deviations are somewhat lower. Analyses of variance found no significant differences between the death or divorce groups and their matched controls. (There were significant overall sex differences found in the divorced-intact pairs where females had higher verbal scores.)

For the sample of those from divorced families, multiple regression analyses were completed using the 14 independent variables to predict SAT scores. These variables included the age at onset of parental separation, remarriage or not, age at mother's remarriage, age at father's remarriage, years between separation and remarriage of custodial parent, mother's income, father's income, older brothers, older sisters, younger brothers, younger sisters. These are all variables that have been suggested by some as likely to be important in mediating any effect of parent absence. The multiple regression analyses produced no significant predictors for the SAT verbal score and none for the females from divorce. The only significant predictor of SAT math scores for the males in the divorced group was the number of older brothers. The more older brothers the lower the math score. This may be birth order effect.

Examination of all possible combinations of two-way interactions between the 14 relevant variables, which produced 364 multiple regression analyses, failed to produce any more significant findings than would be expected due to chance alone.

Thus, none of our analyses found a significant difference in any aspect of SAT performance between college students from intact or single-parent families. Furthermore, with the exception of one variable, older siblings,

none of the factors which have been suggested to affect single-parent students' scholastic performance were found in this study to be significantly correlated with SAT scores.

We will now turn our attention to the second major area of interest: The effects of parental absence on the sex role development of children. It is widely held, both by professional and laymen, that parental absence is detrimental to the sex role development of children. In the past, parental absence has most often been defined as father absence and boys have most often been the subjects of interest. In 1966, Kohlberg concluded that most studies reported by that date found little difference in the sex role development of boys in fatherless homes. Of the remaining findings some found less masculine development while others found more masculine development in father absent boys. In a 1973 review, Herzog and Sudia concluded that on the basis of available evidence no well supported conclusion could be made. Of eight studies done since the 1979 review half, the studies by Alduous, Kagel, Muir and Sparer, have found that father absent boys did differ from those in intact families. Two, those by Badaine and by Cox, have reported that boys living in father absent homes were less masculine than those raised in intact homes. A study by Santrock found that father absent boys were more masculine sex typed.

The studies reviewed thus far used measurement methods that assume masculinity and femininity to be opposite ends of a continuum. Therefore an individual was sex typed either masculine or feminine. More recently, masculinity and femininity have been conceptualized as two independent dimensions so that one individual can possess both masculine and feminine attributes. This has been referred to as androgyny. Based on this conceptual

change, new measures have been devised. One such measure is the BEM Sex Role Inventory. On the BEM, respondents rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 7 for a list of characteristics. From this is obtained two numerical scores, one for masculinity and one for femininity. These are used to categorize each respondent as masculine, feminine, androgynous or undifferentiated.

In 1980, Kurdek and Siesky used the BEM to classify 10 to 19 year olds of divorced parents. When matched with children of intact families both boys and girls were significantly more androgynous. However, this study used T-ratio scores rather than a median split which is the procedure recommended by BEM.

The present study used college students to examine the importance of father absence as a child on the sex role typing of that child as an adult. Unlike the majority of past research, this study used both males and females as subjects and examined the importance of many variables neglected in the past. These included cause of father absence, age of subject at separation, socioeconomic status, and whether or not a parent remarried. It used the BEM as a measure of masculinity and femininity and used the median split procedure to determine sex role category.

Participants were from undergraduate courses in introductory and child psychology. Father absent subjects had experienced father absence prior to age 18 and lived with their mother thereafter. Some had experienced parental divorce and some father death. Persons in both groups were matched with controls who were from intact families and were similar in age and sex to those in the other two groups. The subject population was predominantly white and primarily between the ages of 19 and 22.

In addition to the 30 item form of the BEM Sex Role Inventory, each subject was asked to complete a questionnaire that elicited demographic information including sex, race, year in school, marital status, and sibling's sex and age. Subjects who experienced father absence were also asked for data related to that event including age of separation, custodial parent, parental remarriage, step siblings' sex and ages.

Using analysis of variance, the masculine and feminine scores of 27 males and 49 females in the divorce group were compared to their respective controls. Means and standard deviations for each group are listed in Table III. Although the masculine scores were about 2 points higher for both sexes in the parent absent group, no differences were statistically significant.

A complex chi square was used to compare the number of individuals in the divorce group who were classified as androgynous, masculine, feminine or undifferentiated to the number of controls in each category. Data for males and females were analyzed separately as before. Although numerically more subjects in the divorce groups were classified as androgynous or masculine, again the differences were not statistically significant. We are still in the process of data analysis and the next step will be correlational analysis. Following examination of the inter-correlation matrix, we will decide whether or not a multivariate analysis is necessary.

We have collected to this point data from 23 females and 10 males who experienced paternal death prior to 18 and who had lived with their mothers. The masculinity and femininity score means and standard deviations for the females only are given in Table 2. Analysis of variance found no significant differences between those form intact families and those experiencing father's death.

The lack of differences between groups in this study supported those who question the widely held belief that parental absence is deleterious to the sex role development of offspring. These results fail to support either Freudian identification theory or social learning theory, which both predict that father absence should be detrimental to the appropriate sex role development of children, particularly boys. These results can be interpreted in support of a cognitive developmental point of view which suggests that sex type identity is formed by the individual's active thinking. The child, for example, makes a cognitive decision "I am a boy." This may lead to modeling of the father, and other models like the self. But this position also suggests that what the boy is told or believes is true for boys will be influential. Therefore unlike identification and social learning theories which predict that fatherless boys will become more feminine, cognitive developmental theory predicts that father absent boys need not differ in sex role typing from boys in intact families.

To sum up, we found no effects of father absence upon either SAT performance or sex roles. Such lack of effects are common in the sex role literature and not unusual in the past literature concerning cognitive development. Why is it that negative effects are sometimes found and sometimes not found?

Certainly the occurrence of parental death or divorce is painful for children. However, perhaps these situations are not by themselves harmful to long term development.

Unfortunately, there are circumstances that do appear to be deleterious for children that may accompany father absence. These include such things as a low family income, lack of a good relationship with either divorced

parent, or conflict between divorced parents. When these occur in parent absent or intact families we may expect to find differences in behaviors.

Obviously more work needs to be done in this area. Questions that we are presently working on include the following:

Do subgroups in our sample differ? What are the effects of mother absence in our population? What about non-college populations?

We believe that answers to these questions are likely to be both reassuring and useful to families who have experienced divorce or death.

Finally, these findings will increase our knowledge by enabling us to see whether some theories of development are better than others at predicting what actually happens to children.